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ABSTRACT

Key elements that affect pronunciation are outlined in this supplement to an adult literacy newsletter. Emphasis is on what students need to know about sounds, stress, intonation, and fluency in order to improve their spoken English. Suggestions are offered for identifying students' needs. Exercises are also provided for practicing sounds, word and sentence stress, intonation, and fluency. (Contains 4 references.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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HELPING ESOL STUDENTS TO IMPROVE THEIR PRONUNCIATION

What do students need to know about sounds, stress, intonation and fluency in order to improve their spoken English? Jane Jordan of the Stockport ESOL Unit outlines the key elements which affect pronunciation and sets out practical advice on teaching and learning strategies.

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Sometimes a student's cry for help is 'I want to speak better', 'People don't understand me', or even, as one student said to me recently 'I want to talk posh!' The problem is not *what* to say but *how* to say it.

What is involved in pronunciation?

The elements that need to be addressed to achieve better spoken English are: sounds, stress, intonation and fluency.

Sounds

There are 44 sounds in English; 24 consonant sounds, 12 vowel sounds and 8 diphthongs (2 vowel sounds joined together). The way these sounds are produced depends on such things as the position of the tongue in relation to the lips and teeth, the shape of the mouth and whether the vocal cords are vibrated or not. It is not within the scope of this article to describe the sounds in detail and it is easy to get this information from standard books on pronunciation. Each sound can be represented by a phonetic symbol or, more simply, by a 'key' word, i.e. a short commonly used word which contains the sound, e.g. 'ten' for 'e'.

Stress

Stress is the beat or rhythm of the language. In English one syllable in a word, and some words in a sentence, are stressed more than others. If all syllables are stressed equally the speaker sounds stilted.

The most common word stress pattern is with the strong stress on the first syllable, e.g. student, but with 3 or 4 syllable words the pattern is more variable, e.g. newspaper, computer, engineer. The stress on a word can change when an extra syllable is added, e.g. photograph, photographer.

Sometimes the same word can be stressed in a different way according to its grammatical function. The stress is at the beginning when the word is a noun or adjective and at the end when it is a verb, e.g. 'Our records show improved performance'. 'Can you record this programme, please?' Giving special stress to particular words in a sentence can affect the meaning, e.g. 'She drives a bus' (i.e. not a car), 'She drives a bus' (but he doesn't).

In a sentence the words that have most meaning tend to have strong stress and the small structural words have weak stress.

e.g. They've gone to London to visit some friends.

Weak stress changes the way these words are pronounced.

e.g. 'To' is 'tə' not 'tu:'

Intonation

This is the tune of the language. The way the voice goes up and down can show that a sentence is ending and the kind of sentence it is. It can show in the spoken language what punctuation can show in the written language. It also shows attitudes and emotions such as surprise, alarm and sarcasm.

The main tunes to be aware of are:

(a) the falling tune at the end of a statement, order, or question-word question. e.g.

'The train has just arrived at Platform 2'.↘

'Do not get on the train yet'.↘

'Where's the buffet?'↘

(b) The rising tune for requests and 'Yes/No' questions:

'Are you ready?'↗

'Could you wait a moment?'↗

The rising tune is also used to listen items except for the last item.

e.g. 'I bought some apples↗, oranges↗, pears↗ and bananas↘.'

It expresses surprise or disbelief:

e.g. 'Really↗! He actually passed his driving test↗!'

Fluency

Fluency does not mean speaking quickly but using sentence stress correctly, making natural word groupings rather than speaking word by word, using contractions such as 'I'll' for 'I will' and merging one word with the next where appropriate, e.g. 'Aftergll'.

'I'll meet you / in the coffee / bar when I've finished my work'. /

Identifying needs

If you want to gear pronunciation practice to the needs of a specific student or group of students there is obviously no point in working through all the sounds of English or all the elements described above.

Listen carefully to the student (it is useful to record her/him) and identify the elements that cause difficulty or cause the student to be misunderstood.

A knowledge of the phonological features of a student's first language, even superficially, is useful here. The areas of difficulty are likely to lie where the first language differs from English, such as sounds which do not exist or are used in different parts of a word. So a Hindi speaker has difficulty distinguishing 'p/b' because there is only one sound in Hindi; Cantonese speakers have problems with the sound 'r' as this does not exist so they substitute 'l'. They also have difficulty with consonant sounds such as 'b', 'd' and 'g' at the end of words as only a few consonants occur at the end of words in Cantonese and these are sounded very lightly. Sometimes the difficulty is an unfamiliar combination of sounds rather than the sounds in isolation. This is particularly true of consonant clusters such as 'st', 'sk', 'str', 'sp' where some speakers tend to insert a vowel sound, e.g. 'sikool' for 'school'.

Different stress and intonation patterns are likely to be transferred to English resulting in a different accent which may cause problems of comprehensibility.

Decide what are the most important aspects to work on. Here a lot depends on the level of students and their aspirations. There is no need to aim at achieving standard English pronunciation. The main criterion is comprehensibility. Students want to be understood when they speak to native English speakers. If they are not, they may be embarrassed and lose the confidence to try again.

How to practise pronunciation skills

As a general rule it is better to build up good pronunciation as an integral part of language teaching or learning. So if you are working with beginners you can encourage clear sound production, correct stress and intonation from the outset. However, students who have already learnt quite a lot of English may, at times, want to focus on specific difficulties as well as pursue an integrated approach. It is also useful to raise students' awareness about pronunciation so they can listen to and imitate native speakers more effectively.

It is usual to practise pronunciation for a few minutes on a regular basis, rather than spend a whole lesson on it. However, if students are particularly interested in this aspect of language, they might enjoy more intensive practice.

In all pronunciation work the first step is discrimination. A student cannot produce a sound, stress pattern or intonation pattern s/he cannot recognise.

Practising sounds

Sounds are only significant when in contrast with other sounds. In other words, if a student pronounces a sound in a word wrongly it only matters if this results in confusion with another word, or if it makes the word incomprehensible. For many speakers the sounds 'th' as in 'the' and 'th' as in 'thin' are difficult to produce and may be replaced by 't', 'd', 's', 'z', but it is rare that this would cause misunderstanding. Usually the context makes it clear which word is intended, e.g. 'It costs t(h)ree pounds.'

However, sometimes confusion can arise between closely related sounds.

'Have you got a pen? pan? pin?'

You therefore need to give students practice in discriminating the sounds that are confused.

To practise discrimination it is usual to pair words which are identical apart from the sounds to be distinguished. These are called minimal pairs, e.g. bin/bean, shop/chop, tin/thin. The student may be able to produce one of the sounds but not the other, or produces a sound somewhere between the two.

First of all demonstrate as far as possible how the two sounds you want the student to distinguish are made. Get her/him to touch the throat to feel the vibration if one of the sounds is voiced (i.e. the vocal cords are vibrated). Exaggerate slightly but do not distort the sound. Watching someone make the sounds can help a student distinguish them at first.

Select a number of pairs as far as possible from words known to the students. It is not the place to introduce new

vocabulary and there is no point in practising with uncommon words students are never likely to use. It can also be difficult to find pairs of common words for some sounds.

Here are some types of exercise:

(a) Say each pair of words and then repeat one of the words and ask students to identify it.

e.g.	write/ride	mat/mad
	cart/card	bat/bad

(b) Ask students to listen and identify whether pairs of words are the same or different.

light/light	S
long/wrong	D
light/right	D
wrong/wrong	S

(c) Read a list of words and ask the student to put them in columns according to sound.

	1 (girl)	2 (ball)
shirt, walk, small, skirt, four, work		

(d) When a student can hear the difference between individual words it can be useful to put the words into sentences to practise discrimination in context, but it is not always possible to think of pairs of realistic sentences. Usually, one or two examples are enough.

I walk in the park.
I work in the park.

I'd like some blue shorts, please.
I'd like some blue shirts, please.

The next step is to help students to produce the sounds. Demonstrate the sounds again and ask the student to repeat the sound in isolation first. Then practise the sound in words and in sentences. There is no need to keep to minimal pairs at this stage. Use examples that are relevant and familiar to the students. Remember that some sounds need to be practised in the middle or at the end of words as well as or instead of at the beginning.

However, the production of some incorrect sounds is less likely to make a student difficult to understand than different stress and intonation patterns. If a student has great difficulty with a particular sound it is not worth spending too much time on it. Other aspects of language are more important.

Practising stress

a. Word stress

(i) Listening and identifying.

Ask students to listen to and recognise common word stress patterns.

e.g.	teacher	correct	holiday
	student	repeat	hospital
	paper	again	alphabet

Notice the effect strong or weak stress has on sounds, e.g. student/dentist. Make sure you pronounce the words naturally and that you say them in the same way each time you repeat them. It helps to record material for pronunciation practice to ensure a consistent model.

You can help students hear the stress patterns by beating the rhythm.

(ii) Students repeat the words. It is useful to record students so they can compare their version with the model.

This kind of practice can easily be incorporated into lessons when, for example, introducing new vocabulary.

(b) Sentence stress

This is a very important aspect of pronunciation. Getting this right means that the language has the right rhythm. Again the sequence is listen, identify, repeat.

Start with short sentences or phrases following the same stress pattern and build up to longer ones.

(i) Tell me
Buy it
Show her

(ii) He knows
It's nice
I'm hot

(iii) He's gone to work
I bought some shoes

(iv) Tell me
Tell me about the film
Tell me about the film you saw yesterday

(v) See if students can hear special stress and understand the meaning of it by saying the same sentence in different ways.

I want to see the film on BBC1

I want to see the film on BBC1

I want to see the film on BBC1

Practising intonation

(a) Ask the student to distinguish rising and falling tunes using one word examples:

e.g. No. Me? Right. Who?

Then practise recognition of sentences with falling and rising tunes.

(b) Practise saying sentences which use the falling tune.

e.g. I liked the film.

Who was in it?

I can't remember.

Write it down.

(c) Practise sentences which use the rising tune.

Did you see the film?

Would you like to go to the cinema?

(d) Practise pairs of sentences, one falling and one rising.

(i) He's not coming to the class today.

Is he coming to the class today?

(ii) Finish your work quickly.

Could you finish your work quickly, please?

(e) Practise words and sentences where the intonation changes the meaning, e.g.

Sorry. (apology)

Sorry? (question)

They've arrived. (statement)

They've arrived? (question)

Practising fluency

(a) Practise contractions. 'I've seen them', rather than 'I have seen them.'

Students who have learnt formal English are not used to doing this and it tends to make them sound rather stilted.

It is important, however, that students know what the contraction stands for, especially where there could be confusion, e.g.

I'd (had) finished my work by 7.00pm.

I'd (would) finish my work if I had time.

(b) Practise linking the sound at the end of one word with the sound at the beginning of the next.

e.g. He broke an arm and a leg.

Sometimes a slight 'y', 'w' or 'r' sound is put in to help glide from one word to the next, e.g. The[y] others; they[y] are; go[w] in; on her[r] own.

(c) Long sentences can be difficult to say fluently. Ask students to identify phrase groups.

e.g. He gets up / at 7 o'clock / and walks / to the station / to catch the train.

Practise building up the sentence phrase by phrase until the whole sentence can be said fluently.

Finally all these elements can be practised together by working on simple dialogues where the language content is familiar to the students. This means they can concentrate on good pronunciation.

A. Excuse me/I bought this yesterday/and it's got a mark on it.

B. Oh, I'm sorry./Would you like/to change it/for another one?

A. Yes, please.

B. Oh dear! I'm afraid/there aren't any more/in your size/in the same colour. Would you like a different colour?

A. No, thanks. I'd rather have my money back.

B. All right. I'll get you a refund.

A. Thank you.

In all pronunciation work the tape recorder is an invaluable aid. Not only can the student listen to the examples over and over again but s/he can record her/himself and compare her/his pronunciation with the examples.

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